Using statistics—Do's & Don'ts

YES – YES: Things to do when using library statistics

- *Know your audience. A detailed presentation for a subcommittee, but a broad overview for the city council or county commissioners.*

- *Personalize the data. Some want to be average or play it safe – travel the middle of the road. If you highlight data above average the result may be a negative reaction.*

- *Keep it short & simple.*

- *Be specific and memorable. Give real-life examples. Add to the impact of the numbers with anecdotal stories. Show what difference a library service made in someone's life.*

- *Establish and build your credibility by honestly using the data. Emphasize what you want but don't lie or try to hide unwanted facts. Future credibility is essential. Remember that sometimes the best statistics are someone else's.*

- *In peer comparisons, use more than one variable and find out what you audience regularly uses for city or county comparisons.*

NO – NO: Things to avoid when using library statistics

- *Avoid emphasizing small percentage changes. Remember that every statistic has a margin of error.*

- *Avoid presenting library statistics only at budget time. They should be used continuously; your audience should get used to seeing information about the library. Over the course of the year, present various data elements.*

- *Avoid stressing the worst only. The presentation should highlight the data that supports your agenda, but should also mention the positive.*

- *Don't forget that numbers, total figures, percentages, etc., only show part of the picture. You must include the human side. Include stories and specific, real-life examples.*
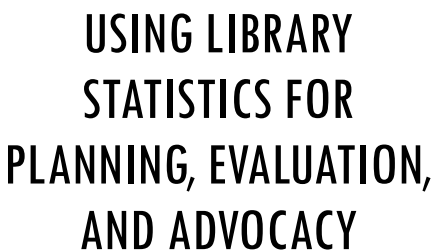
Sources of Library Statistics

♦ http://library.utah.gov/programs/development/statistics/index.html

♦ http://harvester.census.gov/imls/compare/index.asp
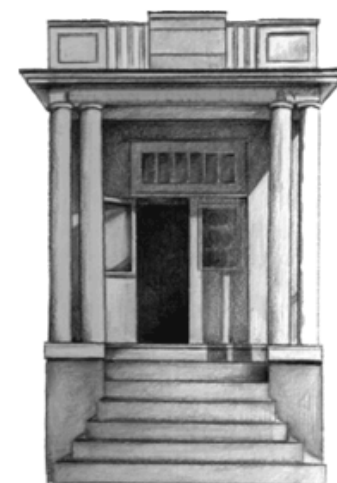
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USING LIBRARY STATISTICS FOR PLANNING, EVALUATION, AND ADVOCACY

Utah State Library

developing, advancing, and promoting library services and access to information.

http://library.utah.gov/

Library statistics should be used for:

On-going planning and evaluation.

The process of periodically and carefully reviewing library data places library trustees and directors in a much stronger position to identify positive trends (efficiencies) and spot negative drifts (deficits). This position shifts the library from simply reacting to changes to purposefully anticipating needs and demand. The Utah State Library and the Institute of Museum and Library Services offer online tools to facilitate retrospective analysis and peer comparisons.

Specific data elements you can use to measure effectiveness of materials use and access:

- Circulation per capita (total circulation / legal service area).
- Reference transactions per capita (total reference transactions / legal service area).
- Title fill rates (# of items found / # of specific title requests).

- Subject/Author fill rates (# of items found / # of subject or author requests).
- In-house use of materials.
- Turnover rate (total circulation / total holdings).

Periodic communication with funding authorities and tax-payers.

One-page documents with library data used to convey information about library activity to the city council, county commissioners, and the public at large. Periodic presentation of succinct library information paves the way to successful communication between the library and its constituents.

Specific data elements you can use to show community interest, need, or support and to measure library use:

- Total number of visits.
- Annual visits per capita (total visits / legal service area).
- Total number of current registered borrowers.
- Registered borrowers per capita (total registered borrowers / legal service area).

Supporting specific library agenda.

Often the library needs to "convince" others that the library should or should not do something. One way to strengthen this argument is through the careful use of verifiable library data to highlight a community need or provide evidence of growth, decrease –change– of a library service, program, or collection.

By comparing library statistics over time you can spot trends and easily produce effective visual aids to convey messages quickly. Specific data elements you can use to justify current programs and services or to lobby for increases are:

- Historical comparison of annual library visits.
- Historical comparison of annual attendance to library programs.
- Historical comparison of annual circulation of materials.
- Historical comparison of annual public use of computers, copiers, and fax machines.